Carl Nelson Gorman - Original Navajo Code Talker

Carl Nelson Gorman was one of the original twenty-nine Navajo Code Talkers. He, with his colleagues, developed the unbreakable code American forces used in the Pacific Theater during World War II.

In this photo—taken on the 27th of June, 1944—we see Gorman tracking enemy movements on the island of Saipan.

The Armed Forces History Museum tells us more about the Navajo Code and how its developers and users significantly contributed to Allied efforts in the Pacific:

> *The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II used the Native-American language as a basis for transmitting encrypted messages. During the first few months of WWII, Japan was able to break every code the United States had devised. This resulted in the Japanese ability to anticipate the action of the United States.*
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> *As a result, the codes became more complex and both sending and encrypting them took hours. Messages sent to military leaders at Guadalcanal were taking as long as two and a half hours to decode. Leaders complained, arguing the US military needed a better, more streamlined way to communicate.*

Where did the Navajo Marines develop their Code?

> *Stationed at Camp Pendleton, the group created a code that was both ingenious and effective. It was originally comprised of 200 or so terms, but by the end of the war, it had expanded to over 600. The messages could be communicated in 20 seconds. Prior to this code, the coding machines would have taken closer to 30 minutes for the same message.*
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> *The Navajo Code Talkers were not permitted to write down any part of the code, not even for reference. Books devised for training were used in the classroom early and not permitted in the field. These men were the living codes whose quick recall and uncanny precision proved vital in saving thousands of lives.*
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> *During the first two days of the Battle of Iwo Jima, the code talkers successfully coded more than 800 transmissions without a single error.*

The code, which the Navajos developed, remains the only code which was unbroken in the history of modern warfare.

After WWII, Gorman became a highly respected artist whose son, R.C. Gorman (whom the *New York Times* called the “Picasso of American Indian art”) followed in his father’s artistic footsteps.

Born in 1907, on the Navajo reservation at Canyon de Chelly, Carl Gorman—whose Navajo name was Kin-Ya-Onny Beyeh—died during 1998, in Gallup, New Mexico.

Like other Navajo children, who attended mission (or government) schools, Gorman was discouraged from speaking his native tongue. Once, as he related later, during his school days he was chained to an iron pipe for a week because he insisted on speaking Navajo.

It’s a good thing he was so insistent. Without the ability to speak their native language, Navajo Code Talkers could not have invented their top-secret, unbreakable code.

Gorman’s anger, at being treated in such a way, did not prevent him from volunteering to be a Marine. In its obituary about him, the *New York Times* tells us more about the Code Talker’s background:

Despite his resulting resentment [over the pipe-chaining incident], *when he learned in 1942 that the Marines were recruiting Navajos fluent in English and Navajo, Mr. Gorman, who had worked as a Government translator but at 34 was too old for the Marines, lied about his age to enlist.*

Partly because Navajo lacked words for most modern military terms, Mr. Gorman and his colleagues worked out a two-tier code in which English words were represented by different Navajo words. Various kinds of planes, for example, were represented by Navajo words for birds, among them tas-chizzie, or swallow, for torpedo plane; jay-sho, or buzzard, for bomber; and da-he-tih-hi, or humming bird, for a fighter plane.

As a result, when the Japanese figured out that Marine radio operators were speaking Navajo and tried to torture a captured Navajo soldier unfamiliar with the code into translating messages, he was as much in the dark as his Japanese captors. He could tell them that chay-da-gahi meant turtle, but he had know idea that turtle meant tank.

Gorman was closely affiliated with the University of California, Davis, where he served as an instructor in Native American Art.

His work is exhibited in national and international galleries. One of his pieces, pictured above, is called "Firelight Sword Dance."

Click on the top image for a better view.

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Image of Carl N. Gorman, in Saipan, online via U.S. National Archives.

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